PLAYA DEL REY - BIRTH OF THE BOARDS

By George Moore

"The Spaniards who settled California in the 18th century dubbed Playa del Rey "Beach of the King," but its chief claim to fame is that it's the last piece of real estate viewed by passengers winging out of Los Angeles International Airport. And the impression is better if one leaves at night.

Despite this lack of natural endowment, the area still earns its place in history by virtue of having been standing in the path of progress. Playa del Rey by happenstance became the birthplace of the boards.

The track owed its inception mainly to an immigrant named John S. "Jack" Prince, a British cyclist who was a pioneer in building board velodromes for bicycle racing. A rather short gentleman with an impressive manner and an impeccable mode of dress, which always included a black derby hat, he was the Pied Piper of the wood. Prince erected a great many of the speedways, beginning with the raceway by the sea and following it in the same time period with a smaller version at Oakland, California.

The Englishman may have pioneered the use of boards for bicycles, but it remained for Fred Moscovics, whose career rivaled the history of the auto-mobile industry itself, to conceive the use of wood planking for the automobile. Frederick E. Moscovics was one of those very special people who come along all too infrequently. A mechanical engineer from Armour Institute in Chicago and the Polytechnic in Zurich, Switzerland, his introduction to horsepower came early in life and its influence set the stage for the development of southern California's Motordrome, the first wooden speedway ever constructed for race cars, in 1910.

Prior to his California involvement, Moscovics' exposure to the wheel came via the drafting offices of Wilhelm Maybach at Motoren Gesselschaft, then as manager of the Daimler-Mercedes racing team in the U.S., and finally as a designer for* the Allen-Kingston Motor Car Company. Allen folded, but not before Moscovics met a brave test driver named Ralph DePalma. Moscovics didn't have too much trouble finding a job with Delco Electric and Delco pointed its newly acquired engineer west, where he and the era of the board tracks germinated.

"If my company had not sent me to California," Moscovics related later in life, ' 'the Motordrome never would have been built. I had made a wager with Howard Marmon that a car could hold a speed of 100 miles an hour on a closed course. Howard was thinking in the more conventional terms of the driver having to slow down for the turns, but I had something else in mind. " On his mind was a banked bowl loosely resembling the velodromes but wide and strong enough to accommodate large heavy vehicles that were basically little more than stripped passenger automobiles modified for racing. Also on his mind was where to build the thing. Moscovics purchased property about half a mile from the ocean and set up a corporate structure which was to be the controlling entity for the race track.

The Playa del Rey decision wasn't a bad one. Venice, just to the north, had constructed a series of canals emulating its European namesake. The spa had acquired a reputation as being the place for swingers. The close proximity of the track was expected to enhance the potential for pulling them from Los Angeles, 20 miles to the east. All that remained was to find the money. With Moscovics, Frank Garbutt (a former racing driver and affluent southern California sportsman) was the primary underwriter.

Third-party contributions came form the Los Angeles Pacific Railway Company, which had a network of trolley lines originating in downtown Los Angeles. The company provided assistance by running a spur line from its Redondo trackage to the speedway. Work began about the first of February, 1910, with Horseless Age magazine dutifully reporting, "Photographs taken February 10th show that construction is well along and indicate by now the new board track is very near completion. "The wedging of the surface planks laid lengthwise is such that when the track is completed it would be possible to remove all the underpinnings and beam supports and yet have a stout saucer remain standing supporting itself perfectly.

Moscovics had laid out a circle 45 feet wide, banked at an angle of 20 degrees, 25 feet above ground level at its perimeter. "1 figured a car would hold a line on the banking just like it was being driven straight and wouldn't skid," he said. "I was almost right. Most would hold a line, but the really fast ones broke loose right from the start."

To enhance safety, he installed a dual guard rail around the outer edge and left the inner edge of the track open. The lower rail had a center point 171/2 inches above the edge of the perimeter planking and functioned as a hub rail for the 34- and 36-inch wheels used in this period. An upper rail was a foot higher and was meant to act as a brace in the event a car began to turn over. Joining the inner edge of the 45-foot banking was a 30-foot-wide freeboard that encircled a belt of crushed stone, a feature designed to function as a brake should a competitor leave the wood at speed.

In theory, it was a great idea. But in practice if the vehicle skated off the freeboard at a sharp angle, its wheels dug in. Driver and mechanic ended up wearing the machine as a sombrero. The huge saucer rose just above Culver Boulevard and the present Los Angeles County Drainage and Flood Control Channel. By mid-March, it appeared a certainty the projected opening day of April 8 was going to be on schedule. Promoters began contemplating a little ' 'show biz" promotion.

They were shrewd enough to know a star attraction was needed to separate the locals from their money at the front gate. Moscovics, who was in New York at the time, wired Barney Oldfield an offer to appear in a special match race against his chief rival, Ralph DePalma. The two were scheduled to bang heads over the hard-packed sands of Daytona Beach on March 15, and Moscovics figured if he could bring Barney to the Motordrome he could coax DePalma to follow."